“Twin Peaks: The Return” and the Search for David Lynch

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By Richard Brody 5/22/2017



Kyle MacLachlan and Sheryl Lee in the updated Red Room of “Twin Peaks: The Return.”PHOTOGRAPH BY SUZANNE TENNER / SHOWTIME

The original “Twin Peaks,” which I watched devotedly when it was first broadcast, in 1990, was television that offered the thrill of a new David Lynch movie every week. From the very start it felt like one person’s brainchild, less in its storytelling than in its details, its tone, its moods, its images. “Twin Peaks” seemed to deepen and broaden, to extend and plumb the cinematic universe of “Blue Velvet,” making use of the devices of serial television as a source of invention—until it fell into the narrative lockstep of serial television. The inventions became devices, and then self-clichés, and I stopped watching. The first two episodes of “Twin Peaks: The Return,” broadcast on Showtime last night, offer only slight reassurance. Though they’re directed by Lynch, they play mainly as Lynchoid, like the work of a skilled and dutiful imitator of Lynch, who borrows elements of the original series and has also, in the meantime, attentively watched the Coen brothers’

“Fargo” (1996) but hasn’t thought much about renewing the art of directing.

Almost all of the first episode and half of the second is exposition, and Lynch, who wrote them with Mark Frost (as he did the first two seasons), doesn’t do much to disguise, adorn, or enliven it. Lynch hasn’t directed a feature film since “Inland Empire” (released in 2006); I don’t know whether he filmed “The Return” sequentially but the first hour and a half feels like a filmmaker under cobwebs, working not merely tentatively but conventionally, following patterns rather than inventing, recording and divulging information rather than creating.

The action starts with a red pickup truck on a dirt road, travelling through the woods into Lynch Country without informing it stylistically. The setting soon switches to New York—to a high-tech, industrial-grunge, loft-like setting in an undefined part of town. It offers decorative touches and pinched, folksy dialogue reminiscent of Lynch’s classic work, but even a moment of gory horror, in which a retro-electronic device turns out to be haunted and deadly, seems like the work of Lynch the consultant rather than Lynch the creator. That nightmarish twist is matched by a crime in the small-town setting of Buckhorn, South Dakota, where police officers, called to an apartment building by a resident who smells something odd, discover a macabre murder and arrest a prominent local resident for the crime.

With a bit of action set in Twin Peaks itself, the first episode offers an element that, more than any composition or fantasy or plot point, resonates with Lynch’s own inner life, and suggests a personal passion inspired by the series itself and its renewal—the return of Special Agent Dale Cooper, played once again by Kyle MacLachlan but in a new guise, trading his nondescript suit and businesslike haircut for a snakeskin shirt, a leather jacket, and a dark, plastered-down pageboy hairdo akin to that of the latter-day Jean-Pierre Léaud. Whether the reference is intended or not, the effect is the same: the return of a hero who bears history and legend along with his own power, and who is as much burdened by their weight as graced with their aura—whose every action, word, and gesture is amplified by the past and measured against it.

Lynch doesn’t seem to come to life as a director until midway through the second episode, and when he does, it’s by way of Special Agent Cooper, back in his classic crisp business attire and coiffure, and a new appearance of a signature device, the Red Room. In the original series, the Red Room very rapidly passed from invention to cliché, from inspiration to device, from ingenuity to self-parody. But, more important (and more moving), it sets up the connection between the shaggy Cooper and the trimmed one, both of whom turn out to be operating in the field at the same time and appear, in all likelihood, to be heading on a collision course from opposite sides of the law.

They're also working from opposite sides of the country, as Cooper the trim is propelled, in a moment of wondrous scenographic transformation, from the Red Room to New York and the mysteriously haunted industrial facility. Even here, however, Lynch's moments of breathtaking inspiration dissipate quickly as he strains for effects; he appears to lack confidence in the bold simplicity of his imagination, and he becomes the man who does too much. Even at its best, the show passes quickly from the flash of imagination to the mechanics of overemphasis, from the artist's vision to the purveyor's packaging.

The cinematic ground has shifted in the twenty-six years between the second season of "Twin Peaks" and this third season, and "Fargo" marks only one, and not the mightiest, of the shifts. At the same time as Joel and Ethan Coen developed a new cinema-literary vocabulary for philosophizing local idiosyncrasies, Quentin Tarantino has expounded the allure of exaggerated violence, along with the hidden violence of arch dialectic; Wes Anderson has raised decorative anachronism to a high moral psychology; Paul Thomas Anderson has uncovered metaphysical overtones in daily experience; and a new generation of independent filmmakers has shifted the very terms and tones of performance. Meanwhile, video technology has prompted filmmakers to renegotiate the terms of their relationship to their surroundings and their imagination. Selfhood and images, imagination and environment, converge as never before, even as surrealism, or, simply, the cinema of the impossible, has become even more commonplace, thanks to C.G.I.—for that matter, thanks to Snapchat filters—than the cinema of the possible.

In retrospect, the original two seasons of "Twin Peaks" come off as one of the harshest Faustian bargains in the history of movies. Lynch got access to a wider audience and a broader narrative span than any filmmaker of his time had. In the process, he became more a filmmaker of the script than a filmmaker of the eye—more specifically, he traded his power of observation for his power of realization, and the heavy hand of imposed order (both visual and textual) has shown in everything that he's done since then.

The best part of "Twin Peaks" is the movie with which Lynch followed it, "Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me." There, he excavates a pure, tragic power from the series' grandiose fantasies and intricate elaborations, and brings it to life in Sheryl Lee's fierce, ravaged performance. But even there he can't restrain himself from the already-clichés of the series, and vitiates the mighty and terrifying vision of sexual violence, moral horror, and emotional dislocation with grandstanding ornamental fancies. That film suggests both the deep and dreadful experience at the core of Lynch's vision, the vast personal source of the mighty mythology of the series—and the artistic cost of its realization.

Lynch may well have revitalized television with his artistry, may well have set the stage for a new generation of television-makers; in the process, he both revealed and exhausted

the best of his art. “Twin Peaks: The Return” will run eighteen hours—a thousand and eighty minutes, or about ten times the length of a usual feature film. Though the creakily mechanical exposition runs ninety minutes, into the second episode, it fulfills the function of, say, nine opening minutes in a feature. That’s why I’m not going to stop watching, and why I’m impatient for the rest of the series. The return of “Twin Peaks” is of far less importance than the return of David Lynch, and what he does with the series is far less fascinating and far less moving than what he may find in himself.